

## Multiagency Rescue Effort Saves Fish Threatened by Wildfires

A team of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees and dedicated partners rescued threatened and endangered fish in June in the Southwest as a lightning-caused wildfire bore down on them.

The Baldy Wildfire, ignited May 9 within the Gila Wilderness Area in New Mexico, and the Whitewater Wildfire, which began May 16, merged into one on May 24, burning nearly 300,000 acres in less than a month.

In early June, about the middle of the fire's life, biologists from the Service's New Mexico Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office conducted an aerial survey to see threats posed by the wildfire to native and highly threatened fish species caught within its perimeter.

Threatened Gila trout were surrounded by the fire. Populations of the endangered spikedace and loach minnow were immediately downstream and vulnerable to ash flows that were certain to come as the summer monsoon storms began. Gila and headwater chubs occupied streams that were also directly threatened by ash flow.

A multiagency rescue effort soon followed that brought high priority at-risk populations of these species into captivity or moved them from streams in totally destroyed watersheds to streams that escaped the wildfire.

On June 14, a team of FWS and Forest Service biologists entered the Gila National Forest burn zone, carrying equipment and supplies on horses and mules. A helicopter waited outside the

wilderness boundaries until contacted. It arrived carrying a tank that had been specially constructed by the Service's Fisheries staff, complete with oxygen bottles that would provide the appropriate amount of dissolved oxygen the fish would need to survive. The tank was lowered to the ground at the end of a 150-foot cable, the fish were loaded, the tank was raised and carried out of the wilderness to waiting trucks.

The crews successfully caught Gila trout in Langstroth Creek, Whiskey Creek and other spots.

Biologists also rescued spikedace and loach minnow from the Forks area of the Gila River before the monsoons. They got to the San Francisco River in time to capture loach minnow and then reached Turkey Creek to retrieve Gila chub.

Two major facilities, the Mora National Fish Hatchery and the Dexter National Fish Hatchery, both of which are managed solely

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for the recovery of aquatic species, scrambled to get transport vehicles on the road to receive captured fish, and started up emergency refugium systems that could house the wild fish, yet isolate them from the populations already cared for at the hatcheries.

The Gila trout went to the Mora National Fish Hatchery and the Service's New Mexico Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office. Dexter National Fish Hatchery took the spikedace, loach and Gila chub.

"We are proud of the work we have done here and are happy to see the fish taking so well to their new environment. I would especially like to stress the fact that these tanks are specially designed to mimic nature, allowing this to be a naturalistic approach unique to Mora," said Mora Hatchery Manager Jeff Powell.

After their stop at Mora National Fish Hatchery, some Gila trout were moved to intact habitats outside the reach of the wildfire. For instance, Spruce Creek Gila

trout were transferred to Ash Creek in the Coronado National Forest in southeastern Arizona. These fish made the last leg of their journey in 5-gallon buckets attached to the backpacks of volunteers from the Service's Arizona Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office, the Coronado National Forest and Youth Conservation Corps enrollees on the Coronado.

Thirty-five engines, 27 water tenders, four dozers, 10 helicopters and 900 people fought the Whitewater Baldy Wildfire Complex, putting it out by late June. The fish rescue was accomplished by three distribution trucks, one helicopter, one chain saw, dedicated people from the Forest Service, the FWS, the state game and fish agencies from both Arizona and New Mexico and volunteers, and 12 mules and horses.

Thanks to their quick and cooperative efforts, a total of 438 Gila trout were brought to safety, along with 167 loach minnow, 267 spikedace and 323 chubs. □

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